

COMMUNIO

a theological journal founded in 1958

Published by the Protestant Theological Faculty
of Charles University in Prague

Editors: Marianne Grohmann (Wien), Michael Kirwan SJ (London), Katharina Künter (Karlsruhe), Dirk G. Lange (Saint Paul, MN), Peter C.A. Morée (Praha), Ivana Noble (Praha), D. Charles Raynal (Decatur, Ga)

Editor-in-chief: Petr Sláma (Praha)

English proofreading: Simone Adams (Atlanta, Ga)
Articles, book-reviews, questions and comments
should be addressed to the editors: cv@etf.cuni.cz

Cheques, orders, subscriptions and all business correspondence should be
addressed to the journal's administration: cv-adm@etf.cuni.cz
Pavel Moskala

Univerzita Karlova v Praze, Evangelická teologická fakulta

Communio viatorum

Černá 9, P. O. Box 529, CZ-115 55 Praha 1, Czech Republic

Phone: +420 221 988 418 (Petr Sláma) Fax: +420 221 988 215

URL: <http://www.etf.cuni.cz/cv.html>

Annual subscription (for three issues): **48 €** or the equivalent
single copy: **16 €**

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Bank identification code: SWIFT (BIC): KOMB CZPP XXXX

IBAN (International Bank Account Number): CZ4501000000511087550287

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Account name: Univerzita Karlova v Praze

Evangelická teologická fakulta

Černá 9, P. O. BOX 529

115 55 Praha 1

Czech Republic

Subscriptions will be renewed automatically every year unless canceled by
January 1st of the year in question.

Typography: Petr Kadlec. Printed by OFTIS Ústí nad Orlicí.

VIATORUM

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Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011, xvii + 174 pp., ISBN 978-1-58743-298-9.

Miroslav Volf focuses on a hard topic in his most recent book: The Vocation of Christians in the Public Square. However, the goal he sets to achieve is hard to accomplish. Instead of a 'quasi-objective' sociological analysis, he writes from the explicit Christian perspective, and proposes an alternative way for Christian engagement with public life. No doubt, Volf has no problem persuading readers of his Christian roots. Can the same be said about the rest of his book? Let us focus upon this question.

In order to make his point, Volf proceeds in three steps: (1) he deals with the malfunctions of Christian faith in the contemporary world (chapters 1–3); (2) he asks the question, what is the main concern of Christians in the world today (chapter 4)?; (3) he proposes a Christian vision of a public good (chapters 5–7). In other words, he proceeds from 'what's wrong', through 'what's correct', to 'how to achieve it'.

First and foremost, the author sets out to explore the various failings of Christianity. To this end, he interestingly distinguishes between prophetic and mystical forms of religion. Volf claims that Christianity often malfunctions when it is practiced as a mystical religion and ceases to be a prophetic critical power.

Christian faith, lived as a prophetic way of wisdom, makes a difference in the personal life of the believer as well as in public life. In contrast, a mystical religion may often fall into idleness and withdrawal from public life. Such a faith is not Christian but selfish. Nonetheless, even a prophetic religion may be misappropriated. A false prophecy misuses the critical potential of religion for its own (political) purposes. It is simply reductionist idea with regard to the living God, who may even be replaced by an idol. The praxis of faith therefore may become coercive. How does one avoid this trap? According to Volf, a genuine prophetic faith is rooted in God from whom one receives a prophetic message. This establishes the duty to bear witness to that message in the world.

One may ask who is the God of Volf? The answer, of course, is: the God of Christian monotheism. Another question arises then: Does he

mean the same monotheism that was and still is behind many atrocities in this world? Here, one has to think about the fact that Volf always tells the story of the Trinitarian monotheism. According to Volf, it means the following: (1) all people are equal because they are related to the same God; (2) this God commands that one love their neighbours, including their otherness; (3) therefore, each right that believers claim for themselves must be claimed for others as well; (4) thus, religion cannot be coerced. To put it crudely, Volf's God is an alterity in God-self. Any violence and coerciveness that enhances a monolithic unity is in contradiction with Christianity.

From this notion of God, Volf elaborates on the distinctive Christian contribution to the common good of humanity and its flourishing. In other words, after recognizing the malfunctions of the faith, Volf looks for its positive and irreplaceable aspect. These have to be found in a specific theology of love and hope. Indeed, the Christian contribution to the human flourishing is the good news about love. This however is not an easy thing. What does love mean in the Christian perspective? Volf suggests that the specific aspect of it is that a neighbour is always taken into account. Human flourishing is something more than a mere self-satisfaction and personal success. It goes beyond individuality and contains self-transcendence.

Who can disagree among theologians? Nonetheless, the question is: How does one make this claim plausible in the public square today? Does the word about the loving God change anything? The inflation of the notion of love is so obvious in the world of today, even among Christians. One can add that the worst malfunctions of faith occur when the notion of love is misused. Unfortunately, a deeper elaboration of the theology of love is missing. I would suggest to the author that his next step should be a book on this theme. It deserves further elaboration on the concepts I find very promising and interesting, for example the commandment of love as the Christian commitment to plurality in public life.

The ultimate goal of this book is to avoid both the Scylla of the total withdrawal of religion from public life (secularism), and the Charybdis of the total saturation of culture by Christian (or any other religious) totalitarianism. Therefore, and to the benefit of the author, the book is not an apology. It is not a plea that the voice of Christians must be

heard. Rather, it is a challenge to those who claim to be the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

In general, I find Volf's book very postmodern. The legacy of the criticism of modern master narratives is present on every page. Volf sharply rejects the nostalgia for 'Christian' Europe or America as a utopian illusion. He is well aware that Christian faith is not at the centre of contemporary culture but on the margins of society. He does not assume this fact as a threat. On the contrary, it is rather an advantage. It enables Christians to be active in the public square without false pretensions. Indeed, Christianity without public activity is defective and inoperative. His vision on the Christian engagement is the following: Christians should propose a middle-path, one between the liberal program of accommodation to culture, the post-liberal program of the re-telling of culture in terms of Christianity, and the separatist program of escape from the world.

An alternative proposition can be summarized like this: "To live as a Christian means to keep inserting a difference into a given culture without ever stepping outside that culture to do so" (93). To put it differently, Christianity touches all dimensions of a culture but does not coerce the transformation of a culture. Christianity is somewhat like an interruptive element in this world. It includes an interesting proposal: Christians should protect the public square as a pluralistic arena and a place of disagreement, however, with an authentic effort to understand each other.

For the reasons outlined above, as well as for Volf's style of writing, I do not hesitate to recommend this book to both theologians who struggle with the question of the public character of Christian faith, and to committed Christians who find their vocation in the midst of this world.

Martin Kočí, Leuven

Mark A. Gabriel, *Jesus and Muhammad: Profound Differences and Surprising Similarities*, Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2004, 272 pp., ISBN 978-1591852919.

Gabriel takes the reader first on his personal journey, describing his captivating story of growing up in an intensely devout Muslim environment in Egypt, knowing the Quran by heart by the age of twelve, becoming an Al Azhar University graduate, and a teacher. His career however, came to an abrupt end when he insisted on asking uncomfortable questions. He first read the Bible when he was thirty-five years of age. His mind, saturated with the picture of Muhammad, was able to see immediately the many parallels between the two religious leaders, as well as the profound differences in the direction of their ministry and impact on their followers. Into this comparison Gabriel draws his readers.

In an easy to read prose Gabriel sketches the lives of the two figures, supplying very vivid details – in Muhammad's case – unknown to the average Western reader. He then provides in-depth analysis of their respective teachings and practices (teachings on prayer, holy war, women etc.). By this method, one can discover how present-day Muslim intellectuals understand Quranic revelation and its implications. The insider's look is what distinguishes Gabriel from a Western scholar learning about Islam in the safety of Western academia. Gabriel is intimately acquainted with both the Muslim environment and learning. Omar Abdel Rahman, known for the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, was his professor of Quranic interpretation (page 7).

While the bulk of Gabriel's book consists of an analysis of the Quranic and New Testament teachings, including numerous quotations from these sources as well as the hadith (the stories related to Muhammad's life), it is framed by and laced with the author's personal observations. Here he brings to the fore the value of one's personal experience as the author testifies, for instance, how strange it feels to a Muslim to hear that God is love. Due to practicing Islam for many years, he is able to not only relate to the Quranic teaching on prayer, but also to share how he actually felt when praying as a Muslim. He can now compare his former experience with his joyful discovery that